



1. Home (<https://www.gov.uk/>)

Speech

PM Belfast speech: 20 July 2018

Prime Minister Theresa May gave a speech in Belfast.

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When I became Prime Minister just over 2 years ago I spoke of the precious bond between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

A union not just of nations, but of peoples bound by a common purpose, whoever we are and wherever we are from.

I also reminded people that the full name of my political party is the Conservative and Unionist Party.

And that name carries a profound significance for me.

The party I lead has a belief in the Union of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland as a central tenet of our political philosophy.

And as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, it is my duty to serve the whole UK and to govern in the interests of every part of it.

And that defines the approach I have taken in government over the past 2 years.

And, as we leave the European Union, I have made protecting and strengthening our own precious Union, by making sure the deal we strike works for every part of the UK, an absolute priority.

Northern Ireland in the UK

My belief in our Union of nations is rooted not just in history, but in our collective achievements.

Time and again we have stood together as one to overcome challenges and do great things.

This year, when we commemorate the centenary of the Armistice, we will remember the sacrifice of brave people from here and indeed the whole island of Ireland.

And at the end of the Second World War, Churchill famously said that without Northern Ireland 'the light which now shines so strongly throughout the world would have been quenched'.

After that war, a great national institution – our National Health Service – was established across the United Kingdom, a symbol of solidarity in our Union.

Today our NHS stands alongside other pillars of our national life.

Our parliamentary democracy and our commitment to the rule of law have been admired and imitated around the world.

These are the results of our common endeavour as a Union.

They are the signs which signify its depth and fundamental strengths.

Right across the UK, far more unites than divides us.

Our sense of community and shared values. Our diversity and tolerance.

And perhaps the greatest strength of our Union is its potential for the future.

What together we can achieve in the years ahead as an outward looking United Kingdom.

As we pursue our Modern Industrial Strategy, government working with business and academia to boost productivity, invest in science and research, and create more good jobs in every community, making the most of rapidly changing technology.

As we leave the European Union, and go out to strike new trade deals around the world, open up new markets for the great products and services of our innovators and entrepreneurs.

As we face the challenges of the future together and draw on the talents and resources of every part of our United Kingdom to overcome them.

And that of course includes Northern Ireland.

Its cultural landscape is dynamic, vibrant and wholly original.

Northern Ireland is a TV and cinema powerhouse, supported by UK government tax policies to support the film industry.

Over 2 million visitors come to Northern Ireland each year as tourists – to experience its vibrancy and beauty.

It is home to great universities, great small businesses, a burgeoning cybersecurity sector.

Northern Ireland makes a major contribution to our Union, and it also derives great benefits from being an integral part of the UK.

Every family and every business benefits from the strength and security that comes from being part of the world's fifth largest economy.

The rest of the UK is by far Northern Ireland's biggest market, accounting for over half of its sales.

Today, unemployment is half the level it was in 2010 and employment is at a near-record high.

The prosperity generated by a country with global interests, and the principle of pooling and sharing our resources that defines the UK, supports public services that people in Northern Ireland rely on.

I believe in the partnership of our four great nations in one proud Union and I want it to endure for generations to come.

So a government I lead will never be neutral in our support for the Union.

We will always make the case for it.

I believe a clear majority of the people of Northern Ireland will continue to have confidence in a future for them and their families that lies within a strong United Kingdom.

But I also respect the fact that a substantial section of the population here identify as Irish and aspire to a future within a united Ireland.

I will always govern in the interests of the whole community in Northern Ireland and not just one part of it.

We are absolutely committed to parity of esteem, and just and equal treatment irrespective of aspiration or identity.

We want to work with all parties, and right across society to build a stronger, more inclusive and more prosperous Northern Ireland that truly works for everyone.

That is why I have met all the main parties on this visit, and why I keep up a regular dialogue with them.

The bright future I want to help build for Northern Ireland is one in which everyone, regardless of their community background or political aspirations, is able to live happy and fulfilling lives and to go as far as their talents and hard work will take them.

I want to say, too, that I share your concern about the episodes of serious disorder in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry last week.

This government - like the communities here - has been absolutely clear in condemning this activity, which is a matter of deep concern for everyone who wants to see a peaceful and prosperous Northern Ireland.

This violence is not representative of the wider community and I pay tribute to the brave officers in the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the emergency services and others in the community who worked tirelessly to keep people safe.

We are all committed to making sure that Northern Ireland continues to move forward.

Belfast Agreement

The principles that define Northern Ireland's place as an integral part of the United Kingdom, along with its unique relationship with Ireland, are of course enshrined in the Belfast Agreement and its successors.

The Belfast Agreement, reached 20 years ago, is a landmark in the history of our islands.

It was overwhelmingly endorsed by referendums here in Northern Ireland and in Ireland.

Successive UK and Irish governments, together with all the parties in Northern Ireland, have worked tirelessly to bring about the historic achievement of peace.

Leaders like David Trimble and John Hume, Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness, have made history.

And my predecessors as Prime Minister have played their part.

Sir John Major helped to start the peace process.

Tony Blair helped bring it to fruition, making power-sharing – which for so long had seemed a prize beyond reach – a reality at last.

Gordon Brown oversaw the devolution of policing and justice powers.

And I saw first-hand as a member of his cabinet how hard David Cameron worked on the Stormont House and Fresh Start Agreements.

I think everyone who has the honour and responsibility of holding the office of Prime Minister of the United Kingdom feels a special responsibility to the people of Northern Ireland.

The historic achievement that the Belfast Agreement and its successors represent is something we should all be proud of.

I am determined to protect it and to uphold the rights it enshrines.

The fact that the current Deputy Chief Constable of the PSNI, Drew Harris, will shortly become Commissioner in An Garda Síochána is an amazing symbol of the progress made over the last twenty years.

And we will continue to work with our friends in the Irish Government, who have been our close partners in that progress including at next week's British and Irish inter-governmental conference.

Power-sharing devolution

The UK government's support for the constitutional principles set out in those agreements, and for the full range of political institutions they established, is steadfast.

So it is a matter of frustration and regret that after enjoying the longest period of unbroken devolved government since the 1960s, Northern Ireland has now been without a fully-functioning Executive for over 18 months.

I commend the Northern Ireland Civil Service for the work they are doing to deliver public services in Northern Ireland in the absence of an Executive.

And I want to see the Assembly and Executive back up and running, taking decisions on behalf of all the people of Northern Ireland. They deserve no less.

So, in full accordance with the three stranded approach, we continue to do all we can to see the re-establishment of devolution and all the institutions of the Belfast Agreement.

But an agreement cannot be imposed.

That needs to come from within Northern Ireland.

A first step has to be the resumption of political dialogue aimed at finding a solution.

And that should begin as soon as possible.

Until then, the UK government will of course fulfil our responsibility to ensure good governance and stability in Northern Ireland.

But interventions from Westminster are no substitute for decisions taken here.

Effective and enduring devolved government is the right thing for Northern Ireland and it is best for the Union.

Principles of the Belfast Agreement

The Belfast Agreement did not just establish a set of institutions, it also defined the principles that underpin their legitimacy for people across the community.

The principle that it is the 'birthright of all the people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both, as they may so choose.'

And the consent principle, that it will always be for the people of Northern Ireland to decide 'without external impediment' what their constitutional future should be...

...with the UK government always giving effect to the democratic choice of the people of Northern Ireland, 'freely and legitimately given'.

These principles are the bedrock of peace and stability in Northern Ireland and it is the duty of the UK government always to respect and uphold them.

Doing so is not just the guiding force behind our approach to government in Northern Ireland, it is also at the heart of our approach to Brexit as well.

In leaving the European Union, as we are doing, we have a duty to ensure that the outcome we achieve works for the whole UK, including Northern Ireland.

For all of us who care about our country, for all of us who want this Union of nations to thrive, that duty goes to the heart of what it means to be a United Kingdom and what it means to be a government.

Our job is not to deal with Brexit in theory, but to make a success of it in practice for all of our people.

And nowhere is the need for practical solutions more vital than here in Northern Ireland, the only place where the United Kingdom shares a land border with an EU Member State that is also a co signatory to the Belfast Agreement.

No hard border

I have said consistently that there can never be a hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland.

I said it in my letter triggering Article 50, in my speech at Mansion House and many times besides.

During the referendum, both campaigns agreed that the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland must remain 'absolutely unchanged'.

Indeed you only have to speak to businesses near the border, as I did yesterday, to see that the notion of a hard border is almost inconceivable.

Thousands of people who cross and re-cross between the UK and Ireland in the normal course of their daily lives cannot be subject to a hard border as they go to work, visit a neighbour, or go to the supermarket.

Neither would it be feasible for firms whose supply and distribution chains span the border.

Many people in communities like Fermanagh and Newry remember the customs border posts, approved roads and security installations of the not-too distant past.

They recall the administrative burdens on business, the disruption caused to lives and livelihoods.

In the Northern Ireland of today, where a seamless border enables unprecedented levels of trade and cooperation north and south, any form of infrastructure at the border is an alien concept.

The practical consequences for people's day to day lives are only part of the story.

Because the seamless border is a foundation stone on which the Belfast Agreement rests, allowing for the 'just and equal treatment for the identity, ethos and aspirations of both communities'.

Anything that undermines that is a breach of the spirit of the Belfast Agreement.

An agreement which we have committed to protect in all its parts and the EU says it will respect.

Both sides in the negotiation understand that and share a determination never to see a hard border in Northern Ireland.

And no technology solution to address these issues has been designed yet, or implemented anywhere in the world, let alone in such a unique and highly sensitive context as the Northern Ireland border.

Some argue that the right approach is for the UK to declare that we will not impose any checks at the border after we have left.

If the EU required the Irish Government to introduce checks, the blame would lie with them.

As I said at Mansion House, this is wrong on 2 levels.

First, this issue arises because of a decision we have taken.

We can't solve it on our own, but nor can we wash our hands of any responsibility for it.

So we must work together to solve it. Second, like any country sharing a land border with another nation, we have a duty to seek customs and regulatory relationships with each other to ensure borders work smoothly.

And in Northern Ireland, that presents a particular challenge.

The protection of the peace process and upholding our binding commitments in the Belfast Agreement are grave responsibilities.

Not to seek a solution would be to resume our career as an independent sovereign trading nation by betraying commitments to part of our

nation and to our nearest neighbour.

No new border within the UK

The reality is that any agreement we reach with the EU will have to provide for the frictionless movement of goods across the Northern Ireland border.

Equally clear is that as a United Kingdom government we could never accept that the way to prevent a hard border with Ireland is to create a new border within the United Kingdom.

To do so would also be a breach of the spirit of the Belfast Agreement, and for exactly the same reason that a hard border would be.

It would not be showing 'parity of esteem' and 'just and equal treatment for the identity, ethos and aspirations' of the Unionist community in Northern Ireland to cut their part of the United Kingdom off from the rest of the UK.

I do not think any member state would be willing to accept that, in order to leave the EU, a nation must accept such a threat to its constitutional integrity.

We made the choice to join as nation states.

We must be free as nation states to make the choice to leave.

The Joint Report that we agreed in December was very clear on this.

We were both explicit that Northern Ireland is an integral part of the United Kingdom, consistent with the principle of consent in the Belfast Agreement.

And the report is also clear about the need to preserve the integrity of the UK's internal market, which is vital to businesses the length and breadth of our country – not least here in Northern Ireland.

Yet the Commission's proposed 'backstop' text does not deliver this.

Under their proposal, Northern Ireland would be represented in trade negotiations and in the World Trade Organisation on tariffs by the European Commission, not its own national government.

The economic and constitutional dislocation of a formal 'third country' customs border within our own country is something I will never accept and I believe no British Prime Minister could ever accept.

And as MPs made clear this week, it is not something the House of Commons will accept either.

We remain absolutely committed to including a legally operative backstop in the Withdrawal Agreement.

But it must be one that delivers on all the commitments made in the December Joint Report.

Our White Paper

Those 2 imperatives, to see no hard border between the UK and Ireland, and no new border that cuts Northern Ireland off from the rest of the UK, are realities we have to contend with as we find a way forward.

Doing so means we must rule out the free trade deal on offer from the EU that excludes Northern Ireland, and creates a border within the UK.

The other alternative, membership of the Customs Union plus an extended version of the EEA, would mean continued free movement, ongoing vast annual payments and total alignment with EU rules across the whole of our economy, and no control of our trade policy.

That would not be consistent with the referendum result.

In order to move the negotiations on our future relationship forward we needed to put a credible third option on the table.

To work for the UK, it needs to honour the Belfast Agreement, deliver on the referendum result and be good for our economy.

And for the EU to consider it, it needs to be a proposal that they can see works for them as well as us.

I believe that the White Paper we published last week, following the agreement reached at Chequers, is that proposal.

It is firmly rooted in the vision for our future relationship that I set out in my speeches at Lancaster House, Florence, Munich and Mansion House.

But it also addresses the questions that the EU has raised in the intervening months and explains how the new relationship would work.

It is a principled and practical Brexit that respects both the constitutional and economic integrity of the UK and the autonomy of the EU.

It also comprehensively addresses our shared commitments to Northern Ireland and Ireland.

It is the right Brexit deal for the United Kingdom.

It delivers on the referendum result.

It takes back control of our borders, with an end to free movement.

It takes back control of our money, with no more vast annual sums paid to the EU.

It takes back control of our laws, ending the jurisdiction of the ECJ in the United Kingdom.

It promotes jobs and prosperity.

The whole of the UK will be outside the Customs Union and Single Market, free to sign trade deals with countries around the world.

We will have regulatory freedom over our services sector, which accounts for 80% of the UK economy.

And we will leave the Common Agricultural Policy and Common Fisheries Policy, gaining the freedom to design new policies that work for our rural and coastal communities.

It will also protect and strengthen our Union by ensuring there is no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland and no border in the UK.

It does that by proposing a free trade area in goods and agricultural products between the UK and the EU.

Our previous proposal that we could achieve frictionless trade by maintaining 'substantially similar' regulatory standards did not prove to be a negotiable position.

The EU would not accept such an unprecedented solution to break down all barriers without having shared rules.

So we needed to make a stronger commitment.

That is why we have put the new offer of a common rulebook in goods and agricultural products on the table.

Some people are concerned about us maintaining common standards with the EU even in this limited area.

I understand that concern, but I think it is in the national interest in a way that it wouldn't be for say financial services.

Let me explain.

First, the rules that cover goods have been relatively stable over the last 30 years.

Second, many of the relevant standards are set by international bodies which we will remain a member of after we leave the EU.

Third, the many UK businesses that trade with the single market will continue to meet these rules anyway whether or not the government makes a promise to.

Making a formal commitment allows us to establish a free trade area that will be good for our whole economy.

It will deliver friction-free trade in goods with our nearest trading partners in the EU.

Businesses will be able to import and export goods across the EU frontier without impediment.

The just-in-time supply chains that underpin high skilled manufacturing jobs across the country will be able to continue without disruption.

And it will ensure we remain one United Kingdom, with a UK internal market, on good terms with our nearest neighbour.

The Belfast Agreement will be protected in full.

Not just by avoiding a hard border but by a legal guarantee that there will be no diminution of the rights for citizens set out in the Agreement.

By upholding the Common Travel Area and associated rights, so there is no question of any new restrictions on movement between the UK and Ireland or access to public services.

And by guaranteeing the protection in full of the range of North-South and East-West co-operation provided for in Strands 2 and 3 of the Agreement.

This is the right deal for the United Kingdom and I believe it is the basis for a new deep and strong relationship with the EU.

The White Paper represents a significant development of our position.

It is a coherent package.

Early in this process, both sides agreed a clear desire to find solutions to the unique circumstances in Northern Ireland through a close future relationship.

We have now developed our proposals and put an approach on the table which does precisely that.

It is now for the EU to respond.

Not simply to fall back onto previous positions which have already been proven unworkable.

But to evolve their position in kind.

And, on that basis, I look forward to resuming constructive discussions.

Conclusion

I firmly believe that we can complete what we have started.

We can negotiate a new relationship with the EU that works in our mutual interest.

One that honours the referendum result, gives us control of our money, our borders, and our laws.

One that sets us on course for a prosperous future, protecting jobs and boosting prosperity.

One that safeguards our Union and allows the whole UK to thrive in the years ahead.

A brighter future for Northern Ireland – where we restore devolution and come together again as a community to serve the interests of the people.

And a brighter future for us all, where we put aside past divisions and work as one to meet the challenges and seize the opportunities that lie ahead.

I am passionate about that brighter future and the possibilities that are within our grasp.

As I said on the day I launched my campaign to become leader of the Conservative and Unionist Party:

‘the process of withdrawal will be complex, and it will require hard work, serious work, and detailed work.’

The government has done that work.

The White Paper is our plan for the future.

It is the way to the stronger and brighter tomorrow that I know awaits the whole United Kingdom.

Now we must have the courage and the determination to seize it.

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